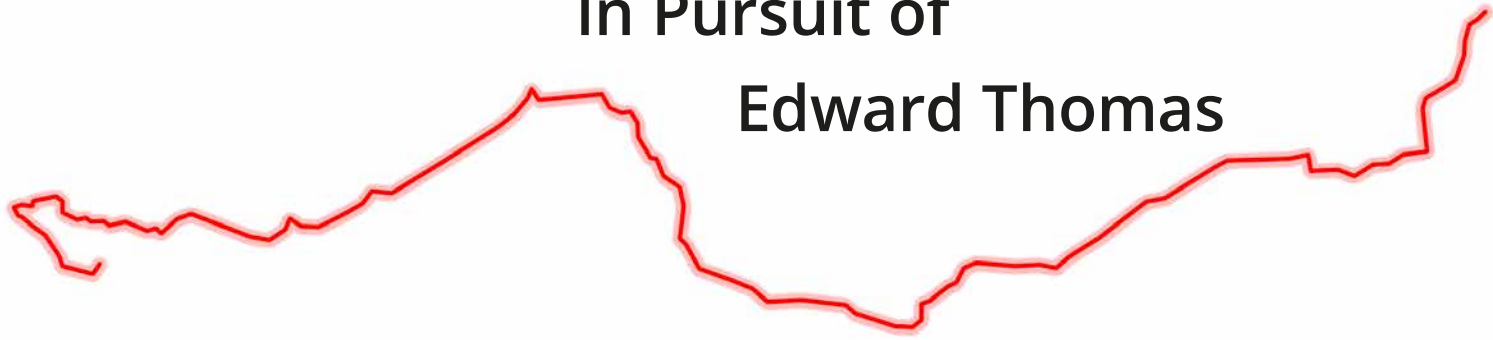


# In Pursuit of Edward Thomas



A digital mapping project following in the tyre tracks of *In Pursuit of Spring*



## Introduction

*In Pursuit of Spring* by [Edward Thomas](#) was published in 1914, just months before the start of the First World War and three years before his untimely death at the Battle of Arras in 1917. The book is the author's account of a bicycle trip taken one Easter when he cycled west from London to the Quantock Hills in Somerset. A meandering tour through southern England in search of spring.



This project seeks to recreate Thomas's route in an attempt to explore the what has changed and what has remained the same in the places he visited during the intervening 100 years.

It does this by interleaving excerpts of *In Pursuit of Spring* with a variety of modern digital mapping techniques including Garmin BaseCamp to plot the route and the associated GPS and GLONASS satellite navigation systems, Google Earth, Google Street View and OpenStreetMap.

The exact locations of the Street View images are given in the search boxes, using the [what3words](#) location addressing system.

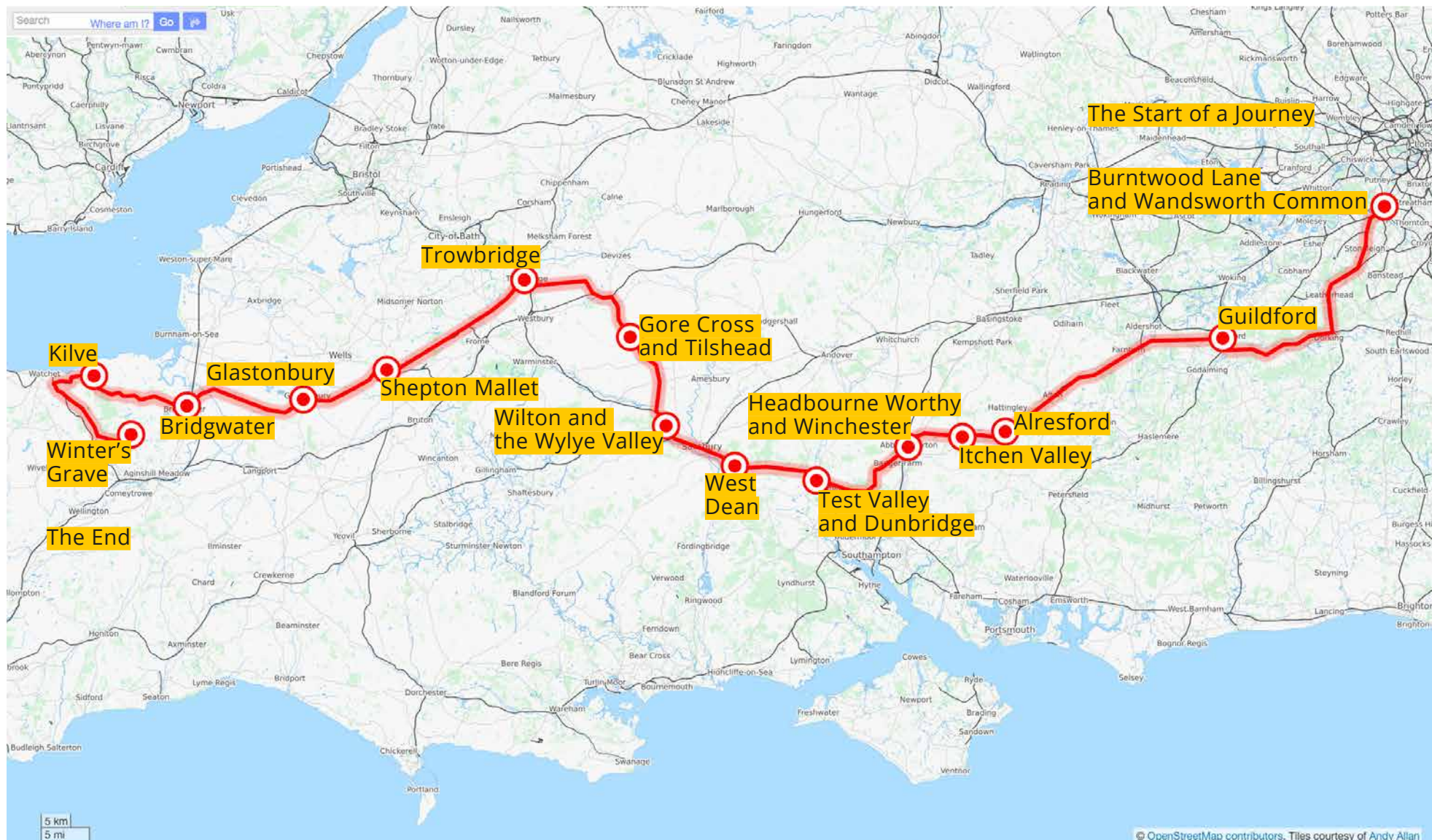
## Would you like to know more?

Following [the links](#) in the text will take you to online information sources.

Following the [what3words](#) navigation links will take you to the exact locations on Google maps.

Clicking the white arrow some of the images will open a slideshow

For desktops and laptops, a GPX file of the interpretation of Thomas's route (compatible with most handheld and cycle GPS units) can be found [here](#).



## Contents

Edward Thomas cycles *In Pursuit of Spring* from London in the east to the Quantock Hills in the west. Therefore if you wish to trace his route in order, you will need to read the above route map from right to left. The links on the map above will take you the relevant page.

## The Start of a Journey

This is the record of a journey from London to the Quantock Hills to Nether Stowey, Kilve, Crowcombe, and West Bagborough, to the high point where the Taunton-Bridgwater road tops the hills and shows all Exmoor behind, all the Mendips before, and upon the left the sea, and Wales very far off.

It was a journey on or with a bicycle. The season was Easter, a March Easter. “A North-Easter, probably?” No. Nor did much north-east go to the making of it. I will give its pedigree briefly, going back only a month that is, to the days when I began to calculate, or guess methodically, what the weather would be like at Easter.

## Mapping & Planning

That evening, without thought of Spring, I began to look at my maps. Spring would come, of course nothing, I supposed, could prevent it and I should have to make up my mind how to go west-ward. Whatever I did, Salisbury Plain was to be crossed, not of necessity but of choice. Whatever happened, I was to start on Good Friday. I was now deciding that I would go through Salisbury, and over the Plain to West Lavington, and thence either through Devizes or through Trowbridge and Bradford. Salisbury was to be reached by Guildford, Farnham, Alton, Alresford.

To Guildford there were several possible ways. I wanted to see Ewell again, and Epsom, and Leatherhead, and to turn round between hill and water under Leatherhead Church and Mickleham Church to Dorking. I could, of course, reach Ewell by way of Kingston, Surbiton, and Tolworth, But this was too much of a digression for the first day. At any rate the Quantocks were to be my goal.

Thither I planned to go, under the North Downs to Guildford, along the Hog’s Back to Farnham, down the Itchen towards Winchester, over the high lands of the Test to Salisbury; across the Plain to Bradford, over the Mendips to Shepton Mallet, and then under the Mendips to Wells and Glastonbury, along the ridge of the Polden Hills to Bridgwater, and so up to the Quantocks and down to the sea.



# Burntwood Lane and Wandsworth Common

So at ten I started, with maps and sufficient clothes to replace what my waterproof could not protect from rain. The suburban by-streets already looked rideable; but they were false prophets: the mainroads were very different. For example, the surface at the top of **Burntwood Lane** was fit only for fancy cycling in and out among a thousand lakes a yard wide and three inches deep. These should either have been stocked with gold-fish and aquatic plants or drained, but some time had been allowed to pass without either course being adopted. It may be that all the draining forces of the neighbourhood had been directed to emptying the ornamental pond on **Wandsworth Common**. Empty it was, and the sodden bed did not improve the look of the common flat by nature, flatter by recent art. The gorse was in bloom amidst a patchwork of turf, gravel, and puddle. A flock of starlings bathed together in a puddle until scared by the dogs.

A tall, stern, bald man without a hat strode earnestly in a straight hue across the grass and water, as if pleasure had become a duty. He was alone on the common. In all the other residences, that form walls round the common almost on every side, hot-cross buns had proved more alluring than the rain and the south-west wind. The scene was, in fact, one more likely to be pleasing in a picture than in itself. It was tame: it was at once artificial and artless, and touched with beauty only by the strong wind and by the subdued brightness due to the rain.



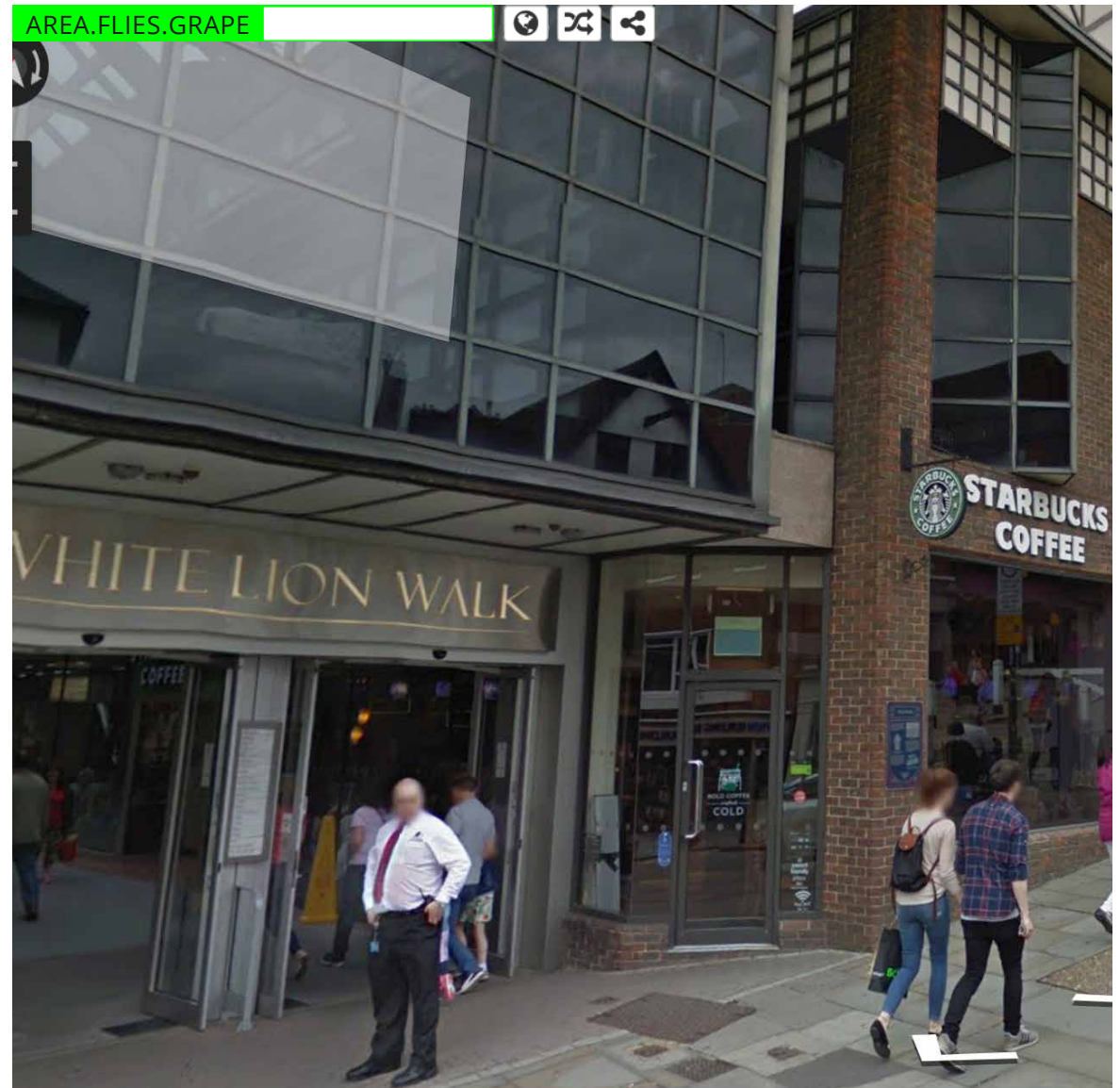
## Notes on the road

Not only has tarmacadam (a new invention in Thomas's time) now fixed the surface of Burntwood Lane (and most of the others en route), it has meant that with the ubiquity of the motor car, Thomas's route is now predominantly A roads and dual carriageways. Exactly the kind of roads you would try to avoid when planning a modern cycle tour.

# Guildford

To avoid the Wey and reach Guildford, which is mainly on this side of the water, The river presently came close to my bank; the road climbed to avoid it, and brought me into Guildford by **Quarry Road**, well above the steep-built, old portion of the town and its church and rookery sycamores, though below the castle. The closed shops, plate glass, and granite roadway of the High Street put the worst possible appearance on the rain that suddenly poured down at six. A motor car dashed under the “**Lion**” arch for shelter.

The shop doorways were rilled by foot-passengers. The plate glass, the granite, and the rain rebounding from it and rushing in two torrents down the steep gutters, made a scene of physical and spiritual chill under a sky that had now lost even the pretence to possess a sun. I had thought not to decide for or against going on to Farnham that night until I had drunk tea. But having once sat in a room not of the “Jolly Butcher,” but a commercial temperance hotel where I could only hear the rain falling from the sky and dripping from roofs, I glided into the resolution to spend the night there.



## Notes on the road

Quarry Road (and the quarry) no longer exist. There is however a Quarry Street (pictured left) that lies on Thomas's route into Guildford. There is no Lion pub in Guildford anymore but there is a **White Lion Walk** shopping arcade (and a Starbucks!) whose position at the bottom of the pedestrianised High Street matches the location described in *In Pursuit of Spring*.



GARDEN.HANDICAPS.ROMANCE



SHEET.TINT.DUSTERS



### Notes on the road

The church is visible at the end of the alley (zoomed in on the right). Close by the church is Alresford station on the Mid-Hants Railway Line. Run these days by volunteers as a heritage line, this railway would have been operating in Thomas's time transporting watercress, the Hampshire speciality to London, hence it's nickname, The Watercress Line.

Contents

## Alresford

**Alresford** is an excellent little town, sad-coloured but not cold, and very airy. For not only does the main street descend from this point steeply west towards Winchester, but the broad street also descends northward, so that over the tops of the houses crossing the bottom of it and over the hidden Alre, are seen the airy highlands of Abbotsstone, Swarraton, and Godsfield. **The towered flint church** and the churchyard make almost as much of a town as Alresford itself, so numerous are the tombs of all the Wools, Keanes, Corderoys, Privetts, Comeses, Whitears, Norgetts, Dykeses, scattered among many small yew trees. At one side stand many headstones of French officers who had served Napoleon, but died in England about the time of Waterloo L'huille, Lavan, Gamier, Riouffe, and Fournier. Inside the church one of the most noticeable things is a tablet to one John Lake, who was born in 1691, died in 1759, and lies near that spot, waiting for the day of judgment.









## Headbourne Worthy

I determined to take the Roman road through **Headbourne Worthy** to Winchester. This brought me through a region of biggish houses, shrubberies, rookeries, motor cars, and carriages, but also down to a brook and a withy bed, and Headbourne Worthy's little church and blunt shingled spire beside it. The blackbirds were singing their best in the hawthorns as I was passing, and in the puddles they were bathing before singing.

## Winchester, leaving via the Westgate

Through the crowd of **Winchester** High Street I walked, and straight out by the **West Gate** and the barracks uphill. I meant to use the Romsey road as far as Ampfield, and thence try to reach Dunbridge. The sky was full of rain, though none was falling. It was a mile before I could mount, and then, for some way, the road was accompanied on the right by yew trees. Between these trees I could see the low, half-wooded Downs crossed by the Roman road to Sarum and by hardly any other road. The most insistent thing there was the Farley Tower, perched on a barrow at one of the highest points, to commemorate not the unknown dead but a horse called Beware Chalkpit, who won a race in 1734 after having leaped into a chalkpit in 1733.



### Notes on the road

Thomas would have gone under the arch beneath the Westgate and may well have stopped at the Plume of Feathers which in his time was attached to the Westgate where the road goes by now. Farley Tower, or the Monument as it is now known (shown left, looking towards Thomas's route), still exists but because of the growth of trees in recent times is difficult to see from the Romsey road.





### Notes on the road

The Bear and Ragged Staff is on the right behind the trees in the top picture. It still doesn't offer accommodation to cyclists, or anyone. The blue signs indicate a cycle lane running alongside the busy road. The station at Dunbridge is still in use but just out of shot opposite the Mill Arms. Up the road above the station is Mottisfont Abbey (right), now owned by the National Trust.

Contents

## Test Valley and Dunbridge

I pushed on against wind and rain to the “Bear and Ragged Staff”, a bigger inn behind a triangle of rushy turf and a walnut tree. “Accommodation for Cyclists” was announced, which I always used to assume meant that there was a bed; but it does not.

It was raining, hailing, and blowing furiously, but they could not give me a bed because they were six in family: no, not any sort of a bed. They directed me to the “Mill Arms” at Dunbridge. Crossing the Test by Kim Bridge Mill, the half-drowned fields smelt like the sea. The mill-house windows shone above the double water plunging away into blackness.

Then, for a space, when I had turned sharply north-westward the wind helped me. Actually I was now at the third inn. They were polite and even smiling, but they informed me that I could by no means have a bed, seeing that the lady and gentleman from somewhere had all the beds. Nor could they tell me of a bed anywhere, because it was Easter and people with a spare room mostly had friends. Luckily a train was just starting which would bear me away from Dunbridge to Salisbury.





# West Dean

Before the first brightening of the light on Sunday morning the rain ceased, and I returned to Dunbridge to pick up the road I had lost on Saturday evening. Above all, I wanted to ride along under **Dean Hill**, the level-ridged chalk hill dotted with yew that is seen running parallel to the railway a quarter of a mile on your left as you near Salisbury from Eastleigh.

The sky was pale, scarcely more blue than the clouds with which it was here and there lightly whitewashed. For five miles I was riding against the stream of the river which rises near Clarendon and meets the Test near Dunbridge. The water and its alders, many of them prostrate, and its drab sedges mingled with intense green and with marsh-marigolds' yellow, were seldom more than a hundred yards away on my right. Pewits wheeled over it with creaking wings and protests against the existence of man.

West Dean, where I entered Wiltshire, a mile from East Dean, is a village with a “Red Lion” inn, a railway station, **a sawmill and timber-yard**, and several groups of houses clustering close to both banks of the river, which is crossed by a road-bridge and by a white footbridge below.



## Notes on the road

The Dean Hill ridge is just visible above the hedgerow in the top picture. Between Thomas's time and today, the hill was hollowed out and used to store naval munitions (shown left in an aerial photograph from 1944). It is now a business park. The Red Lion in West Dean no longer exists but East Brothers Timber has been trading continuously since 1886.





## Tilshead and Joan-a-Gore's

I hoped to reach **Tilshead** before it rained, or, better still, the elms and farm buildings at Joan-a-Gore's at the crossing of the Ridge Way. Tilshead's trees lay visible before me for a mile or more. Its street of cottages and houses that are more than cottages I entered before the rain. On leaving Tilshead, it is a hedgeless road, with more or less wide margins of rough grass, along which proceed two lines of poplars, some dead, some newly planted, all unprosperous and resembling the sails of windmills. A league of ploughland on either hand was broken only by a clump or two on the high ridges and a rick on the lower.

I reached **Joan-a-Gore's**. The farm-house, the spacious farm-yard and group of irregular, shadowy, thatched buildings, and the surrounding rookery elms, all on a gently-sloping ground next to the road this is the finest modern thing on the Plain. The trees make a nearly continuous copse with the elms and ashes that stand around and above the thatched cart lodges and combined sheds and cottages at Joan-a-Gore's Cross.

No hedge, wall, or fence divides this group from my road or from the Ridge Way crossing it, and I turned into one of the doorless cart lodges to eat.



### Notes on the road

Salisbury Plain is now the largest military training area on British soil. The Ridge Way track at the tank crossing (pictured left) leads to Imber, a village who's inhabitants were forcibly evicted in 1943 so the land could be used to prepare for D-Day. The village remains in control of the military and with the exception of Christmas, Easter and a few days in the summer, it remains out of bounds.

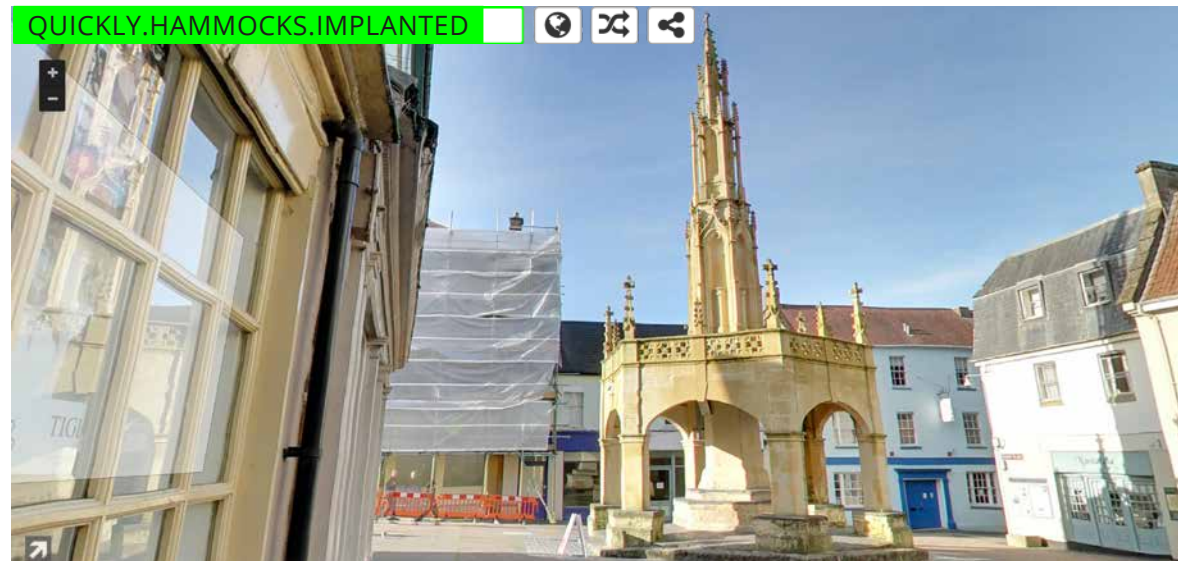
# Trowbridge

The afternoon was as fine as Easter Monday could be, all that could be desired by chapel-goers for their Anniversary Tea. It was the very weather that Trowbridge people needed on Good Friday for a walk to Farleigh Castle, for beer or tea and watercress at the “Hungerford Arms.” As I bicycled into Trowbridge at four o’clock the inhabitants were streaming out along the dry road westward.

## Shepton Mallet

The Other Man would not stay in **Shepton Mallet**. He called it a godless place, and I laughed, supposing he lamented the lack of Apollo or Dionysus or Aphrodite; but he justified the word by relating his first visit to the church. The bell was ringing. It was five minutes to eleven on a Wednesday, a day of north-east wind, in February. With him entered a clergyman, and except for the old bellringer, the church was empty.

I re-entered the main street by a side street broad enough for a market-place. The market cross stands at the turn. It is a stone canopy, supported by six pillars in a circle, and one central pillar surrounded by two stone steps or seats, and the south side wears a dial, dated 1841.



## Notes on the road

The Other Man is a fellow cyclist and erstwhile companion/rival (or possibly a narrative device) that Thomas encounters in several places along the route. Although they often cycle together, their conversations are slightly antagonistic and Thomas blames the Other Man for bad navigation when they cycle off route.

The Market Cross in Shepton Mallet still has pride of place in the town centre. Another Shepton landmark Thomas would have cycled past is the Anglo-Barvarian Brewery. Now the Anglo Trading Estate, this Grade II listing building was built in 1864 and claimed to be the first place in England to brew lager. Thomas may have approved!





### Notes on the road

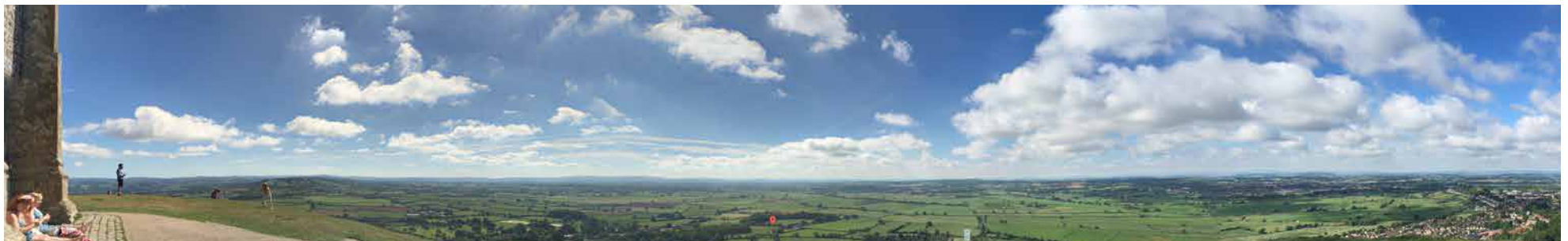
Glastonbury; where Jesus was said to have visited Britain (*did those feet in ancient times*) and where Joseph of Arimathea struck his staff into the ground and the Holy Thorn blossomed (there is a variety of hawthorn that grows specifically in the Glastonbury area that flowers twice a year). The supposed resting place of the Holy Grail and the site of the oldest church in England. Also the location of the tomb of King Arthur and Guinevere, his queen.

However recent research by the Archaeology Department at the University of Reading has shown that these myths and legends that Glastonbury is famous for were probably invented by 12th century monks looking to raise money after a catastrophic fire. However these myths, as prevalent now as when Thomas cycled through, are still what attracts most visitors to Glastonbury today. That and the music festival.

## Glastonbury

For three miles I was in the flat green land of Queen's Sedgemoor, drained by straight sedgy watercourses, along which grow lines of elm, willow, or pine. **Glastonbury Tor** mounted up out of the flat before me, like a huge tumulus, almost bare, but tipped by St. Michael's tower. Soon the ground began to rise on my left, and the crooked apple orchards of Avalon came down to the roadside, their turf starred by innumerable daisies and gilt celandines. Winding round the base of the Tor, I rode into Glastonbury, and down its broad, straight hill past **St. John the Baptist Church** and the notoriously mediaeval "Pilgrim's Inn," and many pastry cooks.

The church stopped me because of its tower and the grass and daisies and half-dozen comfortable box tombs of its churchyard, irregularly placed and not quite upright. One of the tombs advertised in plain lettering the fact that John Down, the occupant, who died in 1829 at the age of eighty-three, had "for more than sixty years owned the abbey." He owned the abbey, nothing more; at least his friends and relatives were content to introduce him to posterity as the man who "for more than sixty years owned the abbey."



# Bridgwater

The road was descending. Bridgwater's tower, spire, and chimneys, and smoke mingling with trees, were visible down on the left, and past them the dim Quantocks fading down to the sea. Two miles of flat field and white-painted orchard, and I was in a street of flat, dull, brick cottages and foul smoke, but possessing an extraordinarily haughty white hart chained over an inn porch of that name. Then the river Parrett; and a dark ship drawn up under the line of tall inns and stores with glimmering windows. I crossed the bridge and walked up Corn Hill between the shops to where the roads fork, one for Taunton, one for Minehead, to left and right of Robert Blake's statue and the pillared dome of the market.

The quay itself is good enough to recall Bideford.

The river is straight for a distance, and separated from the quayside buildings only by the roadway. These buildings, ship-brokers' and contractors', port authority's and customs and excise offices, a steam sawmill, and the "Fountain," "Dolphin," and "King's Head," are plain enough, mostly with tall flat fronts with scant lettering and no decoration, all in a block, looking over at the low level of the Castle Field north-eastward, where cattle grazed in the neighbourhood of chimney-stacks and railway signals. The Arthur was waiting for a cargo. The Emma was unloading coal.



## Notes on the road

In Thomas's time, Bridgwater had many more industries than it does today. It was a centre for ceramic manufacturing. The clay tiles and bricks that were produced in vast quantities here were shipped out through the port. Now all that remains of that industry is the Somerset Brick and Tile Museum, situated at the site of a former brickworks. The port, already on the decline when Thomas visited, ceased trading commercially in 1971.

The blue sign in the foreground indicates that this road is part of the National Cycle Network. Started in 1977 by the sustainable transport charity Sustrans, the NCN is a collection of traffic-free paths and quiet roads that combine to create interlinking cycling routes covering over 14,000 miles in Britain.

By coincidence, the bicycle pictured top left on the advertising hoarding is surprisingly similar to the bike Thomas would have used in his pursuit of Spring.





# Winter's Grave

Turning to the left again, when the signpost declared it seven and three-quarter miles to Bridgwater, I found myself on a glorious sunlit road without hedge, bank, or fence on either side, proceeding through fern, gorse, and ash trees scattered over mossy slopes. Down the slopes I looked across the flat valley to the Mendips and Brent Knoll, and to the Steep and Flat Holms, resting like clouds on a pale, cloudy sea; what is more, through a low-arched rainbow I saw the blueness of the hills of South Wales. The sun had both dried the turf and warmed it. The million gorse petals seemed to be flames sown by the sun. By the side of the road were the first bluebells and cowslips. They were not growing there, but some child had gathered them below at Stowey or Durleigh, and then, getting tired of them, had dropped them. They were beginning to wilt, but they lay upon the grave of Winter. I was quite sure of that.

Winter may rise up through mould alive with violets and primroses and daffodils, but when cowslips and bluebells have grown over his grave he cannot rise again: he is dead and rotten, and from his ashes the blossoms are springing. Therefore, I was glad to see them. Even to have seen them on a railway station seat in the rain, brought from far off on an Easter Monday, would have been something; here, in the sun, they were as if they had been fragments fallen out of that rainbow over against Wales.

I had found **Winter's grave**; I had found Spring, and I was confident that I could ride home again and find Spring all along the road.



## Notes on the road

Having cycled in the Quantocks on a number of occasions, they are a beautiful and unique range of hills. It's easy to see why Thomas chose them as his destination.



SOBS.ONLINE.PURCHASER



## This project uses

GLONASS and GPS Satellite navigation systems

Garmin BaseCamp   OpenStreetMap   Google Earth

Google Street View   what3words   Internet Archive

